

# Linguistic Aspects of Intercultural Communication

## ABSTRACT

The paper deals with linguistic issues hampering intercultural communication. These issues are:

1. Collocational or lexical-phraseological constraints of speech production. This means that any word in any language has its own, characteristic only of the language in question, set or reserve of words with which it is compatible
2. Difference in semantic and stylistic connotations.  
Words of different languages with the same meaning (that is referring to the same object or phenomenon of reality) may have different connotations determining their use in speech.  
For example, the English word *crimson* and the Russian word *bagrovyy* as colour terms refer to the same part of spectre but the Russian word has strong negative connotations unlike its English “equivalent”.
3. The socio-cultural factor is a great problem of communication because it is invisible and often forgotten. Every nation has its own cultural vision (picture) of the world underlying its language picture which may lead to conflicts of communication.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Aspects of Intercultural Communication.

The problems of communication in general and intercultural communion in particular have become especially urgent nowadays for very obvious social, political, economical and other reasons.

It has become crystal-clear that the future of mankind depends on the so-called “human factor”, i.e. on whether people of different nations, ethnic groups representing different cultures will manage to find a common language, figuratively speaking.

Speaking literally, however, language **is** the main means of communications. Again, I am afraid, this is something well-known and obvious, and there was no need to have covered all the distance that separates Russia and South Africa in order to state obvious things.

However, another well-known truth is that obvious things are most easily ignored and forgotten, they are lying on the surface and therefore remain unseen and unnoticed – this is one of many paradoxes of human perception.

Therefore I dare draw your attention to such an obvious thing as linguistic aspects of intercultural communication.

Now the term “intercultural communication” is extremely popular, as I have already said.

However, strangely enough, 15 years ago in Russia it was practically unknown. The fact is that “the human factor” I have just mentioned implies two barriers on the way of human communication: language and cultural ones.

Language barrier is known from the time of the Tower of Babel. Cultural barrier is unseen until a clash between your own indigenous culture and an alien one takes place. At best these clashes are surprising, but usually they are simply off-putting or shocking (hence, the term *culture shock*).

Thus, the cultural barrier is far more dangerous than the language barrier. It is made, as it were, of absolutely transparent glass and is imperceptible until one ends up with a black eye, having bumped into it. It is dangerous too in that cultural mistakes are usually taken much more to heart than are language mistakes and this despite the fact that the former are far more excusable: there are no general rules – no grammars of culture nor dictionaries of culture – to help one avoid cultural mistakes as there are in the case of languages. We all know from our own experience that native speakers are usually very good-natured about the mistakes we make when speaking their language. But cultural mistakes, as a rule, are not forgiven so easily and leave a very negative impression.

This leads to a conclusion: **all the intricacies and depth of the problems inherent in inter-linguistic and cross-cultural communication are shown up particularly clearly, and sometimes even acknowledged, in comparison of foreign languages with one’s own mother tongue, of foreign cultures with one’s own culture.**

Indeed, only knowledge of at least two languages and two cultures reveals – as distant horizons are revealed from mountain tops – certain concealed characteristics and, accordingly, concealed difficulties not visible from the level of one language. From this an important practical conclusion may be drawn: **native speakers who teach their mother tongue as a foreign language and who do not know the mother tongue of their students see neither the concealed characteristics nor the concealed difficulties.** And this accounts for the great advantage – surprise, surprise! – enjoyed by non-native teachers of foreign languages over native speakers of these languages.

What are the main linguistic difficulties hampering international and intercultural communication?

However, as the subject of my talk is “Linguistic aspects of intercultural communication”, it is necessary to state the interrelation between language and culture. They are inseparable. Language is part of culture and culture is part of language.

The interrelation of language and culture is traditionally expressed through widely-used metaphors: language is a mirror of culture, it reflects the world around us and the world inside us. Moreover, it also reflects a people’s collective-self-consciousness, its mentality, national character, way of life, customs and traditions, moral standards and values, and world outlook.

Language is a treasure-house, repository of culture. Cultural values are stored in all its forms – lexis, grammar, idioms, proverbs, sayings, in folklore, fiction and non-fiction, oral and written discourse.

Language is a transmitter, a carrier of culture; it passes on the treasures of national culture that are preserved in it, from generation to generation. In mastering their native language, children also assimilate the generalized cultural experience of preceding generations.

Language is an instrument of culture. It forms the identity of a native speaker by forcing upon him or her the world-view, mentality, attitude to people, etc., inherent in it – in other words, the culture of a people who use this language to communicate with one another.

As a mirror language reflects not just culture but the whole world surrounding us. It creates, as we all know very well, a language picture of the world. This picture is nation-specific and it is imposed on native speakers of the language.

Developing this metaphor with a picture, what language reflects can be presented as a **mosaic** which is made of little pieces – words and other language units functionally equivalent of words.

Thus, learning a language in general and a foreign language in particular begins with learning a word – first the sound (oral form) or the look of it (written form) – and then the meaning. The forms of words of different languages are obviously different (the Tower of Babel!) but their meanings must be the same.

You are learning a foreign language in order to be able to communicate, but communication is possible only on the basis of *a shared code*. To share a code you must know the meanings of foreign word and the meanings must be *the same* in both languages for if they are different the code is not shared.

However, words of different languages denoting the same things may be different in many ways.

1. The volume of semantics (the sizes of corresponding pieces of the two mosaics). The Russian *dom* has a broader meaning than the English *house*: it includes *home, building, block of flats, condominium, mansion*.
2. Occurrence in speech (*dom* – in a Russian address: Downing Street dom 10; in English it is: 10 Downing street).
3. stylistic connotations: *bagrovyy* and *crimson* coincide semantically but *bagrovyy* has negative connotations while *crimson* has positive connotations. (Pieces of the two mosaics differ in colour (or shades of colour).

These are obvious difficulties.

The more concealed are collocational, or lexico-phraseological constraints governing the use of language. This means that any word in any language has its own, characteristic only of the language in question, set or reserve of words with which it is compatible. That is to say, it is ‘friends’ and harmonizes (combines) with certain words and is not ‘friends’, and therefore never harmonizes (combines) with others. Why does the English verb *to pay* (give somebody money for goods, services, etc.) collocate with such incompatible – from the Russian point of view – nouns as *attention, visit, compliments*? Why are the Russian word combinations *высокая трава* (lit., *high grass*), *крепкий чай* (lit., *firm tea*), *сильный дождь* (lit., *strong, powerful rain*) translated into English as *long grass, strong tea* and *heavy rain*?

There is only one answer to this: each word has its own collocation or valency. And collocation or valency is nation-specific (not universal) in the sense that it is characteristic only of a given word in a given language. The specific character of collocation becomes evident only in juxtaposition to other languages much as one becomes aware of one’s own culture through coming into contact (clashing) with an alien culture. Thus native speakers of a language do not see the problem, it never occurs to them that in a certain language tea can be strong and compliments – paid.

Lexical collocation undermines the foundations of translation and interpretation. Bilingual dictionaries are a case in point. The translation of words with the help of a dictionary that gives “equivalents” of their meanings in another language can lead students astray and encourage them to use foreign words in contexts typical of their own language.

Let us take, for example, the very simple (in terms of its commonness) word *книга* and its

English equivalent *book*. English-Russian dictionaries give this word in its most frequently occurring collocations:

- A book on/about birds* – книга о жизни птиц
- A reference book* – справочник
- A cheque book* – чековая книжка
- A ration book* – карточки
- To do the books* – вести счета
- Our order books are full* – мы больше не принимаем заказов
- To be in smb's good/bad books* – быть на хорошем, плохом счету
- I can read her like a book* – я вижу ее насквозь
- We must stick to/go by the book* – надо действовать по правилам
- I'll take a leaf out of your book* – я последую твоему примеру
- He was brought to book for that* – за это его привлекли к ответу

Only one of these is translated into Russian as *книга*.

These differences are even more striking in word combinations. One can shock an audience by stating that native speakers of English, as is indicated by the language, do not wash their heads. And, indeed, in the direct sense – with soap and water – they do not. They *wash their hair*, the equivalent to the Russian word combination *мыть голову* (lit., to wash one's head). It is surprising, with political correctness being such an issue today, that nobody has become concerned about hurting the feelings of the bald. The latter also have to say *to wash one's hair* in English although it would come more naturally to them to say, as in Russian, *to wash one's head*. We all have heads, but as for hair... The English expression, *to wash one's head*, is used figuratively and here its meaning is close to the Russian – also figurative – expression *намылить кому-нибудь голову/шею* (lit., to soap sb's head, neck, fig., to reproach sb severely)

Thus, the “equivalence” of words of different languages seems to be more and more unrealistic, or, rather, less and less probable. But even in those rare cases when all these purely linguistic moments actually correspond in different languages of the full equivalency of these words, one should not forget about extra-linguistic differences, i.e. the fact that both the things and the concepts thereof can differ.

#### 4. Sociocultural connotations

At this point the equivalence of meanings turns into a real problem. The problem is that the so-called “meaning” of the word (i.e. a reference of a certain complex of sounds or letters to a thing or phenomenon of the real world) is actually a thread connecting the world of speech with the world of reality. Or, rather, it is a path leading from the world of speech to the real world. Then every word of every speech community leads to the world where the language-users live.

Talking about words and what lies beyond them we deal with the following 3 levels:

- 1.) The level of reality where objects and phenomena live and function.
- 2.) The level of thinking where there are concepts and ideas about real objects and phenomena.  
The concepts and ideals are determined by culture, ideology, mentality, etc.
- 3.) The level of speech where words live, collocate, function.

At the level of thinking the concepts denoted by “the same” words may differ greatly because they are determined by different cultures, histories, geographies, etc. of different peoples.

In other words, another pitfall, even more concealed, than the mysteries and unpredictability of lexical collocation, is the conflict between the cultural ideas held by different nations about those things and phenomena in the external world which are designated by “equivalent” words in these

languages. These cultural ideas are usually responsible for words in different languages developing varying stylistic and cultural connotations.

Thus, even the lexical designation of such a universal notion as the color *green* arouses great doubt at the level of its absolute lexical equivalence and undoubtedly varies from language to language in view of the word's differing metaphoric and stylistic connotations. The combination *зеленые глаза* (green eyes) has a poetic, romantic overtone in Russian and suggests an image of bewitching, magical or mermaid's eyes. In English, however, the word combination *green eyes* is a metaphor for envy and contains explicit negative connotations. These negative associations were "introduced" by Shakespeare who, in "Othello", referred to jealousy as a *green-eyed monster*.

And another example: the Russian word combination, *черная кошка*, just like its English equivalent, *black cat*, denotes a pet, a cat of black color. But in Russian culture, according to tradition, a black cat brings bad luck and therefore the word combination has strong negative associations.

Another example. When Russian President Vladimir Putin met British prime-minister Tony Blair in St. Petersburg in March, 2000 he spoke about Chechens' insulting attitude to Russians and illustrated this by an abusive slogan in Russian in a Chechen military camp: *Above us is Allah, under us are goats*. British prime-minister was obviously puzzled as he could not see anything insulting. But the Russian word for *goat* is very rude when it is used about people. Now it is widely used. The English word does have "usually disapproving" connotations when used about a man with the meaning "very active sexually, or would like to be and makes it obvious". CIDE marks it as *dated*. No wonder Tony Blair could not see the insult: as Chechens live in the mountains, above them is Allah and under them are mountain goats. It sounds rather poetic than insulting.

The words in the given examples are equivalent in meaning but different in stylistic and cultural connotations.

Thus, the "equivalence" of words of different languages seem to be more and more unrealistic, or, rather, less and less probable.

The socio-cultural factor, i.e. those socio-cultural structures underlying language structures, totally undermine the idea of "equivalency" of words in different languages having the same meaning, i.e. relating to the same things and phenomena in the external world.

All this becomes especially clear in case of people who are bilingual but monocultural. Of exceptional value in this regard is the information contained in Andrei Makine's book, «Le Testament français».

Andrei Makine, a Russian, was born in 1957 in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, studied at Moscow State University, and emigrated to France in 1987 where he began writing novels. His fourth book, «Le Testament français», published in 1995, was the first novel in the history of French literature to win two prizes simultaneously: the most prestigious French literary award, the Goncourt prize and the Medici prize. All Makine's novels are written in French. Since childhood he has been bilingual in two languages: Russian and French that he learnt from his French grandmother.

The conflict between the reality of life in the Russian world and the French language becomes evident from the following excerpts from this outstanding work.

Speaking about her birthplace, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Makine's grandmother, Charlotte, refers to it as a "village".

She had said it in French but we only knew Russian villages. And a village in Russia is inevitably a ring of izbas, indeed the very word in Russian, *derevnya*, comes from *derevo* – a tree, wood. The confusion persisted, despite the clarifications which Charlotte's stories would later bring. At the name of "Neuilly" we had immediate visions of the village with its wooden houses,

its herd and its cockerel. And when, the following summer, Charlotte spoke to us for the first time about a certain Marcel Proust: “By the way, we used to see him playing tennis at Neuilly, on the Boulevard Bineau”, we pictured the dandy with big languorous eyes (she had shown us his photo) – there among the izbas!

Beneath the fragile patina of our French words Russian reality often showed through. The President of the Republic was bound to have something Stalinesque about him in the portrait sketched by our imagination. Neuilly was peopled with kolkhozniks.

With the passage of time, this double vision of the world, the ensuing personality split and the on-going conflict of two languages within a single culture, cause more and more inconvenience for the main character. Thus the use of two words: the Russian word *царь* and the French loan word *tsar*- results in a clash of two images in the boy’s mind. Language-wise, the words are full equivalents, but the Russian word *царь* stands for the bloodthirsty tyrant Nicholas II of Soviet history book frame, whereas the French word *tsar* evokes associations of the elegant young tsar Nicholas II and his beautiful wife who had come to Paris to attend the ceremony for the laying of the foundation stone of the Alexander III Bridge and of the festive atmosphere of balls and banquets given in honour of the royal couple, i.e. it ties in with the image created in the stories told by the boy’s French grandmother.

Thus, language is a mirror of both the external and cultural-conceptual world (the world of culturally dependent concepts), it reflects both of them. This mirror may be said to be distorted because, rather than an objective, impartial view of the world, it provides a subjective, nation-specific view filtered through the prism of a nation’s spirit and mind. It would be more correct, therefore, to speak of language as a creative, even magic, rather than a distorting, mirror. Thus, the negative connotations of the word “distorting” can be avoided and the creative, formative role of language in reference to man – underscored. After all, language does more than passively reflect everything that man obtains through his sensual, creative and cultural experience. It (the language) simultaneously forms (i.e. in continuous interaction with mind and culture) the native speaker as a member of the given socio-cultural community by instilling and developing in him/her a system of values, morals, attitudes and behavioral patterns.

Using the widely-spread metaphor about language (or culture) picture of the world, one can say that each nation has its own cultural vision of the world as do art movements. One and the same hay stack would be seen quite differently by a realist, impressionist, cubist, or abstract artist and therefore look quite different in their reproduction of it. Language can be compared to an artist who paints from life and creates a model of it, the real-life objects having been transformed by his creative imagination.

The reflection of the world in language is the collective artistic effort of the nation speaking that language. Along with their mother tongue, each new generation is presented with a complete cultural set already inherent in which are national character traits, world-view (think about the inner form of this word: world-view, vision of the world), systems of values and so on.

Thus, linguistic difficulties – both open and hidden – are the problems that we, teachers of modern languages, have to solve.

To avoid the hidden trap of lexical-phraseological collocability, the student of a foreign language should learn not individual words and their meanings but the common and more or less fixed collocations in which these words occur in a given language.

In order to let students understand sociocultural connotations a new subject has been introduced which we call “the world of a language under study”. This subject is given by two parallel courses – one by a native speaker and a representative of the student’s indigenous culture.

To find a common language is a difficult task, but it can be solved if we are fully aware of pitfalls on the road to peace and cooperation.

Linguists of the world, teachers of languages, unite in order to shatter barriers – linguistic and non-linguistic – separating people.

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